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ABSTRACT

The recent Irish film "Into the West" (1992) explores the myth of the West on two continents. Images from television and movies appear as a visual reference point within "Into the West"; the main characters, two young Irish boys, are fascinated with the American West of cowboys and Indians as depicted in countless Hollywood versions. The image of the horse operates as the common denominator to the exploration of both myths, since the boys embark on a rescue mission after they see a horse that was stolen from them appear in a televised sporting event. The horse as visual icon crosses the boundaries of time, space, and culture; it defines the parameters of the Western genre in theme and style and represents key elements of the identity of the cowboy. Traditionally, the traits of power and freedom associated with the depictions of the horse shape the masculine identity of the cowboy. "Into the West" shows how the bonding process of horse and man frequently represents a rite of passage for young Westerners, an initiation into manhood. As in other Western sagas, the journey of the two main characters represents both physical movement across the landscape and spiritual quest. (AEF)

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Travellers And Cowboys: Myths Of The Irish West

by Gretchen Bisplinghoff

Abstract

The recent Irish film "Into the West" (1992) explores the myth of the West on two continents. The image of the horse operates as the common denominator to the exploration of both myths. The horse as visual icon crosses boundaries of space, time and culture to explore the elements of Hollywood genre in the Irish landscape.

The West Of Song And Legend

After spending the night in town, two young "cowboy-bandits" wake up to find themselves surrounded by the law. To escape, the duo jump down from a balcony onto the back of their trusty mount, a fiery white stallion. To their cries of "Hi Yo, Silver," the magnificent horse rears up, pawing the air, before leaping forward to make their getaway. In an earlier scene, horse and riders are foregrounded against the majestic sweep of distant mountains. As they approach, riding straight down the dusty road toward the camera, the "cowboys" are singing. The camera slowly tilts down to the great horse's hooves, as he prances in time to their song: "Let's go riding way out West. Let's go riding way out West." However, these cowboys are riding into the West of song and legend, of myth and mountains not on the great white horse Silver, but on the magical steed Tir na nOg, and they're not headed for the Rockies, but for the Wicklow Mountains and Killarney.

The recent Irish film "Into the West" (1992) explores the myth of the West on two continents. The riders on horseback are two young Irish boys, Tito and Ossie, who have heard their Grandpa Reilly tell stories around the campfire about the magical land of eternal youth beyond the mountains and over the sea. Grandpa's stories of the Irish West of legend become intertwined with and filtered through the boys' fascination with the American West of cowboys and Indians as depicted in countless Hollywood versions. The Hollywood version of American history informs the action in Ireland throughout, from the boys' evocation of key elements and re-enactment of archetypal situations to the constant presence of scenes on mass media screens.

Mass Media Referents

Images on mass media screens appear as a visual reference point throughout the film. Near the beginning of the film, the boys watch scenes on television of cowboys and Indians battling while racing across the American desert. They watch the television while seated on the back of Tir na nOg whom they've smuggled into their cramped projects apartment by way of a service elevator. When their television is taken away, they seize the opportunity to surreptitiously watch the next door neighbor's television, which is showing scenes from "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid." Later, they sneak into a movie theater after hours; there the three adventurers eat popcorn and watch "Back to the Future," specifically the scene in which the time machine car is chased by Indians on horseback. Boys and horse are framed from behind within the large screen action; Tir na nOg's shadow falls sharply in silhouette across the projected visuals.

Their adventure into the West is precipitated when the authorities seize the horse and a wealthy unscrupulous businessman arranges to buy him illegally. The boys search for him fruitlessly until the day that they go into a video store to find a Western. As they search the shelves for one that they haven't seen yet, the television screen in the background shows scenes of the Grand National Championship and the new

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wonder horse of the jumping world, National Security. The boys recognize Tir na nOg at once. In the next scene, the police roust Papa Reilly and take him to the police station to question him as to the whereabouts of his sons. They force him to watch a tape of the Grand National which reveals the boys disrupting the proceedings and galloping off on Tir na nOg. Following their escape, Tito and Ossie decide that since they are wanted "horse thieves" with a price on their heads, they will of course make their getaway as Tito says, "To the West! The Wild West!"

The Horse As Visual Icon

The image of the horse operates as the common denominator to the exploration of both myths. The horse as visual icon crosses boundaries of space, time and culture. As a visual symbol, this icon functions to define the parameters of the Western genre in theme and style. Defining stylistic features of the Hollywood Western include long shots and extreme long shots of figures on horseback against the distinctive landscape, whether they are cavalry, posse, cowboys or Indians (Cawelti, 1970, pp. 42-43). (Fig. 1) As Robert Warshow points out, "These are sharply defined acquirements, giving to the figure of the Westerner an apparent moral clarity which corresponds to the clarity of his physical image against his bare landscape; initially, at any rate, the Western movie presents itself as being without mystery, its whole universe comprehended in what we see on the screen" (Warshow, 1962, p. 139). (Fig. 2)

Another distinctive stylistic feature are the chase scenes of posse and bandits, cavalry and Indians and stagecoach and Indians captured in rapid travelling shots: "...those 'cinematic' elements which have long been understood to give the Western theme its special appropriateness for the movies: the wide expanses of land, the free movement of men on horses...land and horses represent the movie's material basis, its sphere of action" (Warshow, 1962, p. 139). At one point in "Into the West" while the boys are riding through the forest, they look up to see riders

Figure 1
Horsemen in Landscape

Figure 2
Horses And Men In Movement

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coming over a ridge, silhouetted against the sky. Tito immediately assumes that it's either Indians or a posse and they take off at a dead run, apparently pursued by the other riders. However, the audience and the boys discover their mistake when they realize that they are sharing their eventual hiding place in the underbrush with a fox, the real quarry of that hunt.

Workhorses And Stars

In the depiction of its role in the Western as a draft animal, the horse pulls the buckboard into dusty "one-horse" towns, the stagecoach across the vast expanse of Monument Valley, and the covered wagons of settlers searching for a new life in the West. (Fig. 3) Although

Figure 3
Horses and Driver

he is the magical magnificent star of "Into the West," Tir na nOg is by no means the only horse in the film. The Reilly family belong to an Irish group euphemistically known as the travellers, formerly known as gypsies or tinkers. Even though many of them now live in small trailers, they still buy, sell and own horses which form a living link to the travellers past when they pulled the colorful gypsy carts and wagons (Maslin, 1993). The nomadic gypsy life as opposed to the structured existence of the "settled" people in large part was made possible by and depended upon their horses.

In the beginning of the film, Tir na nOg approaches Grandpa who, with his horse-drawn cart, still lives by the old ways. Tir na nOg follows Grandpa and the cart back to a travellers' encampment in the urban wasteland outside the Ballymun projects of the northern Dublin suburbs. All of the other horses at the encampment are obviously of heavier draft stock reflecting such breeds as Belgians, Percherons and Clydesdales. The kids in the encampment clamor to be allowed to ride these animals when they have been unhitched. Tir na nOg's light color and finely chiseled features contrast sharply with the appearance of these other animals. His flashy, spirited movement, head and tail held high, together with his fine conformation indicate his thoroughbred blood. As in the depictions of the Hollywood Western, this visual difference between the animals reveals important thematic distinctions.

Cowboy Identity

The emblem of the horse, a certain kind of horse, represents key elements of the identity of the cowboy, especially the cowboy star. Popular cowboy heroes were double-billed as partners in an inseparable team of horse and man: Tom Mix and Black Jack, Roy Rogers and Trigger, the Lone Ranger and his great horse Silver. These horses all shared the same common characteristics of being fine-blooded, flashy-gaited animals which separated them from the other horses in the films and demonstrated the status of their owners: "...in color, features, 'intelligence' no other horse is the match of Trigger, Silver and company...It almost seems as though the horse enhances the star's qualities as much as the star enhances the horse" (Brauer, 1975, p. 36). At the encampment, Tir na nOg is

immediately accepted as yet another horse for the children to ride. No one comments about his strikingly different appearance, however, this difference resonates at once with the audience in terms of these themes of cowboy identity.

Traditionally, the traits of power and freedom associated with the depictions of the horse shape the masculine identity of the cowboy. As Parker Tyler notes in "The Horse: Totem Animal of Male Power," the image of the horse has been interpreted as a "power symbol...an extension of the man's personal power, and more specifically, of his sexual power" (Tyler, 1947, p. 112). Thus, in his mastery of the horse the cowboy claims its powers as his own. Throughout the genre, this is nowhere more apparent than in the key scenes which depict the cowboy taming a wild stallion, thereby acquiring its great speed and strength. To name only a very few of the many films in which this mastery of the wild horse occupies a central role in the narrative, these include: "Smoky" (1933, 1946 and 1966 versions), "King of the Wild Horses" (1949), "King of the Stallions" (1942), "King of the Wild Stallions" (1959), "Wild Stallion" (1952), "Wild Fire" (1945), and the films based on the Zane Grey novels such as "Lightning" (1927) and "Wild Horse Mesa" (1925, 1932 and 1947 versions).

Male Rite Of Passage

This bonding process of horse and man frequently represents a rite of passage for young Westerners, an initiation into manhood. The horse functions as a "totem animal in the primitive initiation rite for pubescent boys" (Tyler, 1947, p. 112). Tir na nOg's arrival at the travellers' encampment signals the fact that Papa Reilly, once King of the Travellers, has lost "his gift" with horses. The wild horse will not let Papa approach him; however, he immediately bonds with Ossie (who has "the gift"), allowing the boy to begin riding him at once. This early scene shows the failure of Papa's authority and the beginnings of Ossie's journey. After his wife's death, Papa started drinking, moved into the Dublin slums and became one of the despised "settled" people. Although nominally the head of the family, he can no longer provide for or protect his sons. When the authorities come for Tir na nOg, the horse reacts violently, bucking and kicking holes through the walls. The boys scream again and again for their father to save their horse, but he hides in the bedroom, burying his head in pillows. Finally, once again only Ossie can calm Tir na nOg; he leads him out of the building for the authorities.

On Tir na nOg's back the boys can imagine that they have become cowboys journeying into the Hollywood West. However, a central question which the boys ask at the beginning of the film and again at the end concerns whether the travellers are cowboys or Indians. Although the boys can be cowboys in their imagination, as travellers the Reilly family is also visually associated with and discriminated against as the "Indians" of Ireland. As Gabriel Byrne, the actor who plays Papa Reilly points out, "The way we treat the travellers in Ireland is hypocritical. We say we're a free society in which all are equal, but we practice apartheid. They are the blacks, the Indians of Ireland" (Clarity, 1991, p. 20). The image of the horse provides the common basis for the complex interaction of all three cultures—cowboys, Indians and travellers. The boys face slurs as they lead Tir na nOg through the crowded Dublin streets; Pap's self-esteem fails under constant assault by a bigoted policeman.

Cowboys, Indians and Travellers

The policeman leads the pursuit of Papa to another encampment out in the Irish "wilderness," where he has gone to seek help in tracking his sons. The cop arrives just after Papa joins some dancers around the blazing campfire. Reluctant at first, Papa eventually begins to express his suppressed emotions in the exuberance of lively music and dance. The cop immediately halts the action of the scene (which in its filming recalls many Hollywood scenes of Indian braves dancing around the campfire before an important hunt or an upcoming battle), commanding them to "Stop it! Stop it! Dancing around like animals

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while your kids are out on the road..." As he departs the campsite after berating them for not providing "proper" homes for their kids, the cops gives orders to his subordinates: "Call me when the animals leave." In the earlier scene at the apartment, this same policeman makes it clear that he sees it as his duty to protect civilized people from such "savages."

As in other Western sagas, the journey of Tito and Ossie on Tir na nOg represents both physical movement across the landscape and spiritual quest (Kitses, 1970). The magical horse carries them over the ground and into the past on several levels—the past of two cultures in myth and legend, the past of their people and the past of their family. Papa, too, must follow them on horseback across the countryside into the wilderness on his journey of redemption. He must return to the old ways to regain his children and his manhood. Tir na nOg disappears back into the waves of the ocean carrying Ossie. His father finally bursts free of the police nets that literally bind his freedom to save his son. But the rescuer's hand that the audience sees Ossie grasp first appears as the horse's flowing tail which then metamorphosizes into his mother's hand. Although initially Ossie appears lifeless when Papa brings him out of the surf, he eventually responds and reports that he has seen his mother, who died giving birth to him. In the final scenes of the film, Papa Reilly returns to the old ways by setting fire to the traveller's cart used by Mary and him, thereby setting her spirit free. As the cart burns, Tir na nOg magically appears within the flames as they reach the end of their journeys.

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